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ABSTRACT

"Illuminative evaluation," as defined by Parlett and Hamilton, "is not a standard methodological package but a general strategy. It aims to be both adaptable and eclectic. The choice of research tactics follows not from research doctrine, but from decisions in each case as to the best available techniques; the problem defines the methods - not vice-versa." An illuminative evaluation technique was used to assess the strengths and weaknesses, and to assist the planners in their understanding of the dynamics and the shape of the First National Summer Institute in Women's Studies. Quantifiable information was obtained through a needs' assessment form, administered to participants (n=48) and staff (n=13), through observations of the formal and informal sessions and staff meetings, and through open-ended questions on an evaluation form. The findings indicate that illuminative evaluation showed promise as one evaluative methodology compatible with feminist activity and theoretical concerns. This model enabled a report to be developed which would serve to offer both qualitative and quantitative data useful to the designing of the Institute, provide information for continued funding of the project, and include documentation of the first year of the Institute. (Author/PN)

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Illuminative Evaluation: Meeting the Special Needs of Feminist Projects

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Introduction

Many feminist scholars have criticized an implicit axiom in research and evaluation "that the choice of a problem is determined by method instead of a method being determined by the problem" (Daly, 1973). In particular, when this unstated but traditional emphasis on the method, rather than on the program or subjects being studied, has been applied to feminist projects, the investigations have ended up being on women and not for women (Duelli-Klein, 1980). Indeed, the accepted, male-dominated view of research and evaluation has led Westkott (1979) and Eichler (1980) to criticize in traditional investigations the types of questions asked; the techniques used; and the conclusions drawn. Thus, they have urged that appropriate methodologies for the study of women's projects be developed.

Aside from evaluative methodologies, criticism has also been directed at the object/subject split between the evaluator and those being assessed. In participatory democratic settings of most women's projects, Duelli-Klein questions whether the detached, neutral outside evaluator can be acceptable to those involved in the project being studied. The traditional remoteness and lack of involvement of the evaluator may be in conflict with the high level of commitment of those within the project. In addition, the removed, "objective" evaluator without understanding and sympathy for the types of societal changes that the subjects are trying to make may actually carry an unintentional bias into the evaluation. Passivity and neutrality can hinder the development of a rapport between the researcher and those being studied. In fact, most feminists have not expected an evaluator to approach a new project free of

preconceived ideas. Some have introduced the term of "conscious subjectivity," (Coyner, 1980) which permits different perspectives to be presented and acknowledges that evaluators also may speak.

The emphasis on feminist methodologies and "conscious subjectivity" necessitates that the evaluative mode of feminist programs is designed to meet those specific requirements. This paper examines the use of illuminative evaluation in a Women's Studies' institute, in which both intense commitment and philosophical perspectives are likely to generate an unusually strong desire among both participants and staff for collaboration in the evaluative process itself. This type of assessment was selected because of its flexibility and varied evaluative techniques.

As defined by Parlett and Hamilton (1977), "illuminative evaluation is not a standard methodological package but a general strategy. It aims to be both adaptable and eclectic. The choice of research tactics follows not from research doctrine, but from decisions in each case as to the best available techniques; the problem defines the methods, not vice-versa."

Another aspect of illuminative evaluation is that it makes no claim bo be value free nor to be capable of total objectivity. But it does try to represent diverse beliefs, ideologies, and opinions that may be encountered in the course of the study. It also attempts to represent differences of thought and perspectives in ways considered to be fair by those holding the views. Still another part of the illuminative model is the acknowledgement of the duality of the evaluator's role - of someone who needs to

become the knowledgeable insider and at the same time preserve the independent status of the outsider. Also, illuminative evaluation is clearly interventionistic in that it attempts to promote changes in the way people view educational processes (Parlett & Dearden, 1977). With its emphasis on change, it has been often recommended for the assessment of innovative programs (Shapiro, Secor, & Butchart, 1981). Additionally, illuminative evaluation's varied techniques can provide both program planners and funding agencies with the kinds of quantifiable data they often require. Finally, it can offer a picture of the often subtle but important qualities of the project which are essential to its full understanding.

Theoretically, illuminative evaluation seemed appropriate as an approach for assessing strengths and weaknesses, and for assisting the planners in their understanding of the dynamics and shape of the First National Summer Institute in Women's Studies. In line with much feminist thinking, the illuminative evaluative process was focused less on pre-determined methodologies and more on the utilization of techniques appropriate to participant and staff interactions; participants could be involved in the assessment process; no claim of perfect objectivity was made as it was assumed that the evaluator would function as a participant observer, not as a distant, impartial outsider. Thus, in theory, illuminative evaluation seemed to have special merits and to be compatible with both staff and participants' needs for involvement with the evaluative process. In practice, this study describes the implementation of illuminative evaluation and attempts to assess

the value of this procedure for the special needs of program developers, staff and participants.

Purpose of the Study

This investigation examines the development of an illuminative evaluation of an intensive summer institute in Women's Studies. In this proposal, two questions are considered:

(1) To what extent can and should the evaluator maintain an independent and objective role within a participatory feminist institute?

(2) In what ways and why is illuminative evaluation a suitable methodology for assessing feminist projects?

Description of the Feminist Institute

The First National Summer Institute in Women Studies was sponsored by the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA) and took place on the campus of The University of Michigan. The GLCA received a grant from the Lilly Endowments to provide substantial support for the first two years of the Institute, beyond which it was intended to be self supporting.

Basic components of this three week institute included: 1.) a daily theory seminar, meeting in groups of twelve; and 2.) a daily teaching and curriculum workshop, meeting in groups of eight. Optional workshops, research and methodology sessions, and special interest group activities were offered. Additionally, lectures, panels, special performances and films were available. Each participant was also pursuing a project in course design or some other form of Women's Studies curriculum development.

Forty-eight participants, thirteen staff members, and two administrators (a director and a local arrangement person) comprised the institute. Forty-six participants were women and two were men. Three of the participants were from outside of the U.S.A.. Fifty per cent were 31-40 years of age and twenty nine per cent were 41-50 years old. Almost three-fourths of those involved received 100% support from their institution to attend. They came from state universities, community colleges, women's colleges and private co-educational liberal arts colleges. Over thirty-five per cent of the participants were assistant professors or lecturers; thirty per cent were full professors or associate professors. When questionned, seventy per cent of them considered their major responsibility to be teaching. although many were involved in Women's Studies or other areas of academic administration.

While the participant group lacked racial and/or ethnic diversity, two of the thirteen staff members were Black women from the U.S. and one was Chilean. Staff members and administrators of the Institute were actively involved in Women's Studies activities on their own campuses.

In pre-Institute planning sessions, the staff agreed that the major components of the Institute should take into account the following issues: sex discrimination, racism, class bias, and the implications of institutionalized heterosexuality.

The Institute itself was an intense experience, focusing on scholarly, political and personal issues. In

designing individual projects, participants were asked to consider the impact within their own college or university settings. A less explicit intention was to encourage additional work toward institutional and/or social change. A range of feminist perspectives were presented in both the theory seminars and in the teaching workshops. Especially in the latter, the critical areas of race, class and sex-gender were discussed and debated. Throughout the Institute, traditional assumptions of the academy were challenged.

Academic colleges and universities which have almost totally omitted attention to women's lives and experiences in their curricular and administrative policy and procedures until recently have only painfully and slowly begun to change. The work of challenging the disciplines and changing the curriculum has barely begun. Yet working toward creating an inclusive academy, not focused merely on white privileged males, is highly exciting, energizing the interest of an increasing number of men as well as women. The commitment of participants in such an Institute was therefore certain to be intense since feminist theory and practice were upper-most in people's minds. Thus, most individuals were not only focused on their own participation in the Institute, but were concerned with the assessment process itself. In this highly critical environment many asked either directly or indirectly: <u>who was to evaluate this intensive experience</u>; <u>how was it to be done</u>; and <u>what would happen with the data collected during the period</u>?

In this intellectually stimulating setting, all assessment processes and procedures derived from the social sciences were challenged and discussed. Evaluative neu-

trality and objectivity were argued against. Bias was thought to be inevitable. Involvement at all stages of the assessment process, by participants, staff and administrators, was desired and requested.

Description of the Evaluation

Evaluation Consultant

From the outset, the director of the Institute envisioned the evaluation of the project to be a collaborative process. Even in the proposal requesting funds for the Institute, she spoke of the assessor, not as an evaluator, but as an evaluation consultant. In her own mind, a distinction was made, and no outside, impartial observer was considered. Instead, a collegiality was sought. Although continous collaboration throughout the evaluation was never discussed, it was evident to the evaluation consultant that some type of collaborative venture was intended.

A model for illuminative evaluation, consisting of a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, was designed. Quantifiable information was obtained through a needs' assessment form, administered to participants and staff, through observations of the formal and informal sessions and staff meetings, and through open-ended questions on the evaluation form.

The evaluation consultant was on-site for an eight day period - four days at the beginning of the Institute and four at the end. She also kept in close telephone contact with the program director.

Although it was recognized that feminists might want to take part in the evaluative process, the extent of that involvement came as a surprise to both the eval-

uation consultant and the Institute director. From the very outset, program planners, staff and participants indicated that they wished to be a part of every aspect of the assessment process - from the formulation of questions to the staffs' preparation of materials they wished to have included in the final report. Often their requests for collaboration were granted.

An example of this type of intensive involvement can be seen in the development of the final questionnaire for participants. Toward the final days of the Institute, the evaluation consultant designed an assessment instrument. She then showed the director and advisor of the project the form, and together significant revisions were made, in both the language and content of the questionnaire. Subsequently, the director and advisor asked that all staff review the instrument. Each staff member proposed changes. Additionally, two of the teaching staff shared the questionnaire with their workshop participants, and further revisions were suggested. The evaluation consultant analyzed and synthesized these suggestions and modified the original instrument markedly. Only one hour prior to its distribution was the questionnaire completed!

Evaluation Process

Below are summarized some interactions which occurred between the evaluation consultant and the program planners, staff, and participants during and immediately after the Institute.

1.) Between evaluation consultant and program planners - The planners communicated with the evaluator throughout the evaluative process; they helped to develop the needs' assessment form and refined the questionnaire;

they assisted in the selection of staff to be interviewed; they indicated the importance of staff and participant involvement in the assessment process; they designed and organized the sessions in which the staff would give their final evaluations.

2.) Between the evaluation consultant and the staff- Selected staff members were observed by the evaluator in their theory and teaching seminars; selected staff were interviewed in an unstructured format; selected individuals were asked to contribute to the formulation of items for the final questionnaire; all personnel assisted in the refinement of the questionnaire before it was distributed; all staff met in small groups at the conclusion of the Institute to evaluate both the structure and the process and to make recommendations for future institutes (the staff then met as a whole for reporting and synthesizing data from the small groups); all staff members made recommendations for future institutes.

3.) Between the evaluation consultant and the participants - Selected participants were observed in seminar and workshop sessions and interviewed in an unstructured format; certain participants asked to be interviewed; some participants critiqued the evaluative techniques and asked for modifications (some of which were granted, some were not).

The Final Report

In collaborative setting, the final report of the Institute posed two major problems: 1.) For whom was it intended? 2.) How should it be used?

From the outset of the project, the director of the Institute wanted evaluative data for three purposes which are listed here according to priority. First of all,

she requested qualitative and quantitative data to improve the Institute in its second year. Next, she wanted to provide useful information for the president of her organization and for the foundation officer of the Institute. Finally, she felt that it was important to document this experience for historical reasons.

Taking into account the needs expressed by the director for evaluative data, the evaluation consultant focused a great deal of attention on information collected for the purposes of strengthening and improving the design of year two of the Institute. She also attempted to synthesize enough data to satisfy the requirements of the president of the director's organization and the foundation officer and to provide a written record of The First National Women's Studies Institute.

Discussion of the Results and Conclusion

In a highly participatory environment in which the focus is on feminist issues, the evaluation consultant learned that total neutrality and objectivity were neither expected nor desired by those involved in the project. During the Institute, the evaluator had to make decisions which resulted in her becoming more of a participant and less of an observer, for she was gaining knowledge which could help change the dynamics of the Institute as it was happening.

The involved procedure, previously described, of designing the final questionnaire was one indication of the collaboration which was expected from her. Although the process of conferring with Institute personnel and participants was time-consuming and taxing for the evaluative consultant, the questionnaire was much clearer and more inclusive because of it. Further, those being

assessed felt directly involved in the evaluative procedure. The evaluation consultant noted that few complaints were made concerning the questionnaire itself and some participants specifically expressed positive comments about it. However, it was interesting to note that a few individuals whose comments had not been elicited in the early stages of revising the instrument, expressed dislike of the questionnaire. Involvement seemed to make a difference in reactions for and against the instrument.

From an evaluative standpoint, what does such criticism mean? Feminist researchers, Westkott (1979) and Eichler (1980), pointed our that in traditional studies criticism focused on the questions asked; the techniques used; and the conclusions drawn. In this project although not traditional, reactions were indeed of this nature. Nevertheless, when sufficient criticisms were made, prior to the completion of the questionnaire, the final instrument was much improved and the attitude of participants, while completing the form, was very positive. Thus, it could be concluded that a stance of independence and objectivity by an evaluator in a feminist setting would have been detrimental to the assessment process and would not have met the special evaluative needs of institute personnel and participants.

The findings of this study also indicated that illuminative evaluation showed promise as one evaluative methodology compatible with feminist activity and theoretical concerns. In line with the purposes of evaluation which the director of the Institute had in mind for year one, the illuminative evaluation model enabled

a report to be developed which would serve to offer both qualitative and quantitative data useful to the designing of year two of the Institute; provide information for continued funding of the project; and include documentation of the first year of the Institute.

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